

Liking it long: Catullus' *Carmina maiora*

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The Roman poet Catullus continues to scandalize. Just check out Charlotte Higgins' blog on a lewd text message quoting Catullus that a wealthy London financier sent to one of his female employees in 2009: <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/nov/24/Catullus-mark-low>. Most shockers to (contemporary) sensibilities can be found in Catullus' shorter poems, which (therefore?) attract the lion's share of critical attention. But it is his eight longer works (*carmina* 61–68, the *carmina maiora*) that we want to look at here. They arguably get you to the very heart of what Catullus' literary project is all about – and stand, perhaps not coincidentally, at the very centre of his work.

If you know anything of Catullus' work, it is probably his shorter poems (the *carmina minora*). It is there that he chronicles, with emotional abandon, the story of his notorious love affair with Lesbia, that promiscuous, 'ball-breaking' (11.20) she-wolf – a love-affair that leads from orgasmic kissing (5.7: 'Give me a thousand, then a hundred...') to the excruciating torments (85: ... *excrucior!*) of unrequited love. There, he rants and raves about political deviants (29.5: 'Queer Romulus' – Caesar, Pompey, or both?), personified penises (especially one Mamurra, the city's Mr Dick – 'not a human at all, but a *mentula magna minax* – a menacing piece of monster-meat': 115.8), and the fornicators (not least himself) in Roman high society. And there, he calls for repeated bouts of casual sex to ease a post-prandial erection (32) and celebrates the exquisite verse of his fellow avant-gardists such as Cinna (95) – or, conversely, riffs against rival versifiers who produce outdated drivel (36: Volusius' *Annals* – as winsome as soiled toilet tissue) and false friends who dare to question his masculinity (16 – the poem that inspired the above-mentioned text message).

This committed personal voice is characteristic of two groups of shorter poems – numbers 1–60 and 69–116 in modern editions, an arrangement that goes back to the one manuscript of Catullus that survived the middle ages. Sandwiched in between are eight poems of a rather different kind: the so-called *carmina maiora* ('longer poems'). They are a motley collection and, over all, rather more

formal in outlook: we get a wedding hymn (61); a singing competition between girls and boys about the pitfalls and benefits of marriage (62); an account of the self-castration of dandy-boy Attis after he fell under the spell of the goddess Cybele (63); a 'mini-epic', or, to use the technical term, *epyllion*, of 400+ hexameters on the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (64); a verse-epistle to his mate Hortalus (65) that gives notice of the recent death of his brother and serves as cover letter to the subsequent poem, a translation of the 'Lock of Berenice', an episode from Hellenistic poet Callimachus' *Aetia* (66); a dialogue with a door in the house of a dysfunctional family about the unsavoury doings that go on inside (67); and the so-called Allius (or Manlius – the text is disputed) elegy, a long reflection on Catullus' loss of creativity in the wake of his brother's funeral, his departure from Rome for his home town of Verona, and his ongoing adulteries with Lesbia (68).

Growing up or falling short?

It is tempting to read the eight *carmina maiora* as a set, which offers deliberately diverse perspectives on the experience of growing up. 61, despite some undeniably disquieting touches, outlines a successful plot of maturation: the groom (an aristocratic power-broker by the name of Manlius Torquatus) is imagined as leaving behind his youthful period of experimentation (including homoerotic flings) to enter into a stable marriage with another member of Rome's nobility (one Junia), in

which each partner is well advised to satisfy the erotic desires of the other. For such sexual symmetry enables not just mutual bedroom bliss but also continuity of lineage: in due course, it should ensure the birth of a mini-Torquatus (61.209: *Torquatus ... paruulus*), who will look just like his daddy. Scripted into the hymn, then, is a coming-of-age trajectory that leads from innocent childhood to youthful exuberance, to the willing acceptance of adult roles of responsibility, including a joyful wedding, happy marriage, successful procreation, and a future full of promise – at least for the male. (The emphasis on gender is important: the possibility to sow wild oats in one's 'youth' – here defined as the period after one reaches sexual maturity but before one settles down in socially expected ways – did not exist for girls, who tended to get married at the onset of puberty or even earlier.)

After 61, however, matters go awry. The girl-chorus of 62 regard wedding-night defloration as an act of pollution that results in the destruction of beauty and the loss of desirability. Attis, in 63, hacks off his genitals in an act of orgiastic delusion (or despe-ration?) just when he reaches the brink of manhood and is about to lose the androgynous good looks that made him the toast of every pederast in his home town's gym – a shocking case of futile gender-bending and arrested development that ends up with her (!) being trapped in a perverse and sterile marriage to the Great Mother goddess Cybele. And while 64 starts out celebrating the wedding of divine Thetis and human Peleus, it ends with noting that this union will be the last of its kind: their offspring Achilles and the atrocities he will perpetrate at Troy, such as insisting from beyond the grave on the sacrifice of the Trojan princess Polyxena on his tomb in a perverse wedding-to-death, result in the gods deciding to leave a sinful humanity to its own vices. Catullus refers to this impious world, in which murder within the family such as fratricide, unspeakable sexual transgression, and the general breakdown of kinship relations proliferate, as 'our own' (64.406).

It is certainly the world he inhabits and explores in the rest of the *carmina maiora*. In 65, just after identifying fratricide as a

contemporary evil, Catullus announces the death of – his brother. While alive, this sibling left no trace in Catullus' poetry; by contrast, the impact of his death on the outlook of his work is stark. For example, poems 1–64 (i.e. the first set of *carmina minora* and the first half of the *carmina maiora*) feature a great variety of different metres (they are hence also referred to as Catullus' *polymetra*); yet from 65 onwards until the very end of the collection all the remaining poems are written in elegiacs – the metre of mourning. Catullus (or whoever arranged the poems in this particular fashion) certainly makes the most of his brother's demise: within his literary world, it serves as cipher for the end of youth, the end of Catullus' family-lineage, the end of happiness and joy, and also, at least as far as metre is concerned, the end of literary experimentation. Troubled kinship relations also haunt the remaining *carmina maiora*. The Callimachean piece he translates in 66 revolves around the marriage of the Egyptian Queen Berenice to her second cousin King Ptolemy Euergetes – a common practice among Egyptian royals, but one that connotes incest in a Roman context. The stage is thus set for 67, where we encounter a father who 'pisses into his son's lap' – Catullus' disgusting image for the defloration of a bride by her father-in-law since the groom could not get it up. And in 68 Catullus once again bemoans the death of his household, while pathetically cherishing sterile acts of secretive sex with Lesbia, hailed in one breath as both divine and a serial adulteress.

In short, none of the characters we meet after 61 succeeds in properly growing up in socially and sexually productive ways, along the trajectory lived by Catullus' Manlius Torquatus – quite the contrary. And one of the most conspicuous failures in this respect is Catullus himself. In addition to the explicitly autobiographical touches of 65 and 68, he also intimates elsewhere that his youth has come to a bitter, indeed tragic end. The image of the plucked and withered flower that the chorus of girls in 62 use to reject marriage recalls poem 11, where Catullus, after having been victimized by Lesbia's voracious sexuality, compares himself to a flower at the edge of a meadow that has been touched by a passing plough. And while 63 ends in the wish on the part of the poet that Cybele should stay away from him, the brutal bond between effeminized Attis and his supernatural mistress bears an eerie resemblance to the dysfunctional relationship between self-effeminizing Catullus and his 'divine' Lesbia.

Alternative narratives of self and city

With the megalomania befitting a first-rate poet, Catullus uses the *carmina maiora* to

place his personal failure to find a socially accepted place and identity in Roman society within a wider, universal context. For another recurrent theme within this set of poems is Troy – not as the city that, after its sack, gave rise to Rome, but as a site of death and destruction. The comparison of Junia to Venus on her way to the judgment of Paris in 61 is one of the poem's troubling touches, which establishes Troy (as well as adultery...) as a key site of reference early on, to which Catullus will return over and over again: Phrygia, where the city is located, is the region where Attis emasculates himself in 63; the song of the Parcae about the career of Achilles in 64 naturally focuses on his role in the Trojan War; Catullus' brother, so we learn in 65, has died and is buried at Troy – rather conveniently so, as it enables Catullus to interlock the personal and the legendary in 68, where he inveighs against Troy as an obscene and unspeakable abomination, the common grave of Asia and Europe, and the burial ground of his own household (68.87–104).

Put differently, just as Catullus does not partake in the positive plot of maturation he imagines for Rome's nobility, so he implicitly disowns the world-historical 'transference of empire' (*translatio imperii*) that saw Rome rise triumphantly from the ashes of Troy. This version of history is not his story; he tells an alternative tale of defeatist insubordination against the foundation myth and the power of Rome. He celebrates literary and youthful, yet all too ephemeral, exuberance, the fragility and evanescence of beauty, and the sterile vanities of romantic passion in an imperial city that ultimately marches to a different drum.

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